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To cite this article: Samuel Charap & Miranda Priebe (2024) Will Putin Stop at Ukraine? That's the Wrong Question, *The Washington Quarterly*, 47:3, 143-159, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319>



Published online: 18 Sep 2024.



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Will Putin Stop at Ukraine? That's the Wrong Question

In the spring of 2024, Western leaders began issuing dire warnings about the threat posed by Russia to NATO allies.¹ During his 2024 State of the Union speech, President Joe Biden addressed the assembled lawmakers: “If anybody in this room thinks Putin will stop at Ukraine, I assure you, he will not.”² Biden was far from alone. “It cannot be ruled out that within a three- to five-year period, Russia will test Article 5 and NATO’s solidarity,” said Denmark Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen.³ German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius echoed this assessment: “we have to take into account that Vladimir Putin might even attack a NATO country one day.” While a Russian attack is not likely “for now,” the minister added: “Our experts expect a period of five to eight years in which this could be possible.” Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk went one step further, arguing Europe was in a “pre-war era.”⁴

Some might dismiss these statements about the Russia threat as rhetorical flourishes that have scant direct impact on policy. Others may see them as attempts to spur complacent Western political systems—and sluggish Western military industries—into action to counter Russia that have little downside. But the leaders’ assertions reflect four increasingly widespread and influential assumptions in the transatlantic community: first, that Russian reconstitution is proceeding rapidly, giving it the capability to attack NATO in the near future; second, that NATO’s deterrent against a risk-acceptant Russia is inadequate; third, that the organizing principle for the alliance’s military planning and broader strategy should be to counter opportunistic Russian aggression; and finally, that a

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© 2024 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 47:3 pp. 143–159
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319>

Russian “win” in Ukraine will embolden the Kremlin and imperil NATO’s security. These assumptions are now motivating proposals to take a hardline approach toward Russia after the Ukraine war ends.⁵

In this article, we assess these four assumptions, and find each questionable. They have led to a focus on planning for opportunistic Russian aggression after the Ukraine war has ended while ignoring other, potentially more plausible pathways to NATO-Russia conflict, such as war resulting from first-strike pressures or an escalation of a second full-scale Russia-Ukraine war. We argue that allies should not optimize their posture and strategy around a single, highly unlikely scenario. Instead, we propose a postwar strategy toward Russia focused on preventing the more likely pathways to a NATO-Russia war, responding to threats below the threshold of armed conflict, and ultimately stabilizing the security environment on the continent.

That strategy would entail taking steps to avoid a NATO-Russia war that results from misperception and minimizing the chances of conflict recurrence in Ukraine, along with maintaining a robust force posture that could respond effectively in a contingency. The objective is a more stable NATO-Russia dynamic in the context of what will be a continued—and likely bitter—rivalry. For the alliance, this is not just a matter of correcting leaders’ talking points. Advanced planning for the aftermath of major wars is a crucial endeavor. While the Russia-Ukraine war is not (as of this writing) a systemic conflict akin to the two World Wars or the Cold War, choices made even following regional wars have resulted in arrangements that forge lasting patterns of international relations. An empirically grounded portrait of the Russia threat should drive NATO’s planning for the day after the Russia-Ukraine war ends.⁶

A Flawed Logic

Western leaders’ recent statements about Russia imply that Moscow is likely to undertake a deliberate act of opportunistic aggression against the alliance. The statements also suggest that Russia will soon gain the capability advantages it needs to carry out such an attack. Further, Western leaders’ recent declarations intimate that NATO’s deterrent against Russian aggression is weak or can be easily undermined. Finally, they argue that a Russian victory in Ukraine would embolden Russia to attack NATO. Below, we discuss why each of these assumptions is problematic.

Assumption I: Russia’s Military Reconstitution Will Tilt the Balance of Power in Its Favor

As noted above, leaders of NATO member states have warned that a Russian attack on the alliance is plausible within the next three to five (or eight)

years. These arguments suggest that the Russian military will rapidly recover from its staggering losses of men and materiel since 2022—and that future losses in the Ukraine war, which implicitly would be over in the next one to two years, will not significantly alter the capabilities picture. As Gen. Christopher Cavoli, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, put it, after the war “NATO would be facing a Russian military significantly more capable than it was before February 2022.”⁷ In short, the assumption is that Russia is on track to pose an even more severe threat in the medium term than before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Moscow has certainly been reconstituting its forces faster than the United States originally expected, but still faces many more challenges than such statements suggest.⁸ It is difficult to underestimate the impact of the loss of so many officers and experienced soldiers for the military as a whole. And the inventory of weapons expended or destroyed in Ukraine is mindboggling. Moreover, as researcher Dara Massicot notes, Russia faces economic, recruiting and retention, military-cultural, and industrial base challenges that will limit the pace of post-war reconstitution and modernization.⁹ The Kremlin has demonstrated that it is not interested in a full-fledged war economy and militarization of all of society; even during wartime, Moscow has set self-imposed limits on reconstitution. For example, Russia has not forced conversion of civilian industrial capabilities to defense production, or conducted a second round of mobilization.¹⁰ In short, Russia will certainly rearm after the war, but it will not be a fast process, nor one that will necessarily produce a force markedly more capable than it was before the war.

Moscow faces many challenges reconstituting its forces

Beyond considering impediments to Russian reconstitution, a realistic net assessment must take into account NATO's increased defense spending since 2022. Estimates for increases in 2023 and 2024 are 9.3 and 17.9 percent, respectively.¹¹ While it is difficult to predict the future pace and effectiveness of this buildup, NATO will certainly be more capable than it was before the full-scale invasion.

But even if Russian reconstitution outpaces NATO's buildup, the alliance has significant quantitative and qualitative advantages. Before the war in Ukraine, Russia was much weaker than NATO in the aggregate, although Moscow had capability advantages on its periphery, particularly vis-à-vis the Baltic states, which have relatively small armed forces and are connected to the rest of the alliance by a 40-mile strip of land. The war revealed that even these local advantages might have been overstated. Further, due to combat losses during the war, the Russian forces based in the Baltic region are less capable than they were before

2022. For example, as of June 2024, satellite imagery suggested that 80 percent of Russian forces and equipment previously stationed along the border with Finland had been employed in Ukraine.¹² Given the overall rate of Russian losses in the war, much of those forces and equipment have presumably been destroyed.

There are significant uncertainties in estimating the real value of Russia's defense spending, but there is little doubt NATO members are collectively far ahead: estimates suggest that military expenditures by NATO member states exceeded \$1.1 trillion in 2023, compared to Russia's \$74 billion.¹³ In 2022, NATO countries had over 3.1 million active-duty military personnel compared to Russia's 900,000. Moreover, NATO equipment enjoyed significant qualitative advantages. For example, 70 percent of non-US NATO members' combat capable-aircraft has been produced or modernized after 1990, compared to 53 percent of Russia's.¹⁴ Further, NATO has more diverse (i.e., far less dependent on commodity exports) and larger economies—over ten times the size of Russia's, and still over seven times as large when the United States is not included—capable of sustaining a long war.¹⁵

In short, there is ample evidence that Russia's postwar military reconstitution will face challenges, and that NATO has important capability and resource advantages. Russia's ground forces—the general purpose forces, marines, and airborne—have suffered particularly heavy losses in Ukraine, complicating any land attack scenarios against NATO. Russia will certainly continue to pose a significant threat to the alliance; Moscow's high-end capabilities—counterspace, sub-surface naval, non-strategic nuclear weapons, etc.—have not been employed at all against Ukraine. And Russia may continue to have local power advantages along parts of the NATO-Russia frontier. But the global and regional balance of power will remain overwhelmingly in the alliance's favor.

Assumption 2: NATO's Deterrent is Weak

In a primetime address to the American people in October 2023, President Biden stated, “If we don't stop Putin's appetite for power and control in Ukraine, he won't limit himself just to Ukraine ... Putin has already threatened to ‘remind’ — quote, ‘remind’ Poland that their western land was a gift from Russia.”¹⁶ It is true that senior Russian officials have made extremely provocative statements about NATO allies, sometimes even appearing to question their sovereignty. But Biden's statement also suggests that Russia's calculus in a potential future decision to attack a US treaty ally would be no different than in deciding to attack Ukraine. In other words, NATO's ability to deter Russia is no greater than Ukraine's, and thus likely to fail. Some analysts have also suggested that Moscow is prone to miscalculation or makes irrational and risk-acceptant decisions, thus making it difficult to deter.¹⁷

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine did demonstrate that Russia is more risk acceptant than previously understood, but its behavior during the war has also shown that NATO's deterrent remains strong. Since 2022, Russia has had much to gain by targeting the flow of arms from NATO countries to Ukraine. Those arms have been essential to Kyiv's war effort. In that sense, the incentive for Russia to attack NATO allies has never been greater. And yet, Moscow has been extremely careful to avoid targeting NATO territory, even while it strikes areas in Ukraine near the borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. This restrained behavior indicates that NATO's deterrent is strong: it has worked even in very challenging circumstances. And Moscow's reluctance to attack the alliance while it is simultaneously conducting such a high-intensity war on a country that borders four allies indicates that the Kremlin's calculus about attacking US allies is indeed different than it is vis-à-vis non-NATO members in the region like Ukraine.

Russian behavior during the war has shown that NATO's deterrent remains strong

Concerns about the viability of NATO's deterrent have centered around the difficulty of denying Moscow a *fait accompli* in the Baltic region where, as noted above, the local distribution of power favors Russia. But having the capability to deny Russia the ability to conduct a land grab in that very difficult geography is not the only way to deter an opportunistic attack. NATO countries' superior forces would be able to counterattack, retake territory, and impose major costs—through military, political and economic means—on Russia.¹⁸ Moscow is not blind to that reality.

Russia has undertaken numerous hostile acts in Europe below the threshold of conventional aggression, ranging from assassinations to sabotage to information operations. Reportedly, these actions have become more intense and numerous since the full-scale war began. Such gray zone activities are much harder to deter than a direct attack; indeed, states resort to them precisely because they see the consequences of overt aggression as too high.¹⁹ NATO can and should undertake measures to build resiliency to these below-the-threshold actions, and to respond forcefully when they occur. But the persistence of these Russian actions, while serious in itself, is not an indication that NATO's conventional deterrent is failing. Direct military aggression is a categorically different challenge; the means to deter it are unlikely to have much effect on actions below that threshold.

Assumption 3: Opportunistic Russian Aggression Should Drive Alliance Planning

The statements from Western leaders cited above imply that Moscow believes it could benefit from a war with NATO and that, given Russia's reconstitution and

the weakness of NATO's deterrent, planning for—and resourcing the response to—opportunistic Russian aggression should be the alliance's organizing principle. These leaders are rarely explicit about what exactly Russia would hope to gain and instead vaguely warn that it “will not stop at Ukraine.” But some analysts are more specific, arguing Putin's imperialistic ambitions would motivate an attack on Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania or Poland. Others claim that Putin would seize part of NATO territory to demonstrate that Article 5 is meaningless, thus destroying the alliance.²⁰

However, neither of these arguments are borne out by Russian strategic thinking or past behavior. First, Moscow's interest in the states along its periphery varies. Put simply, Russia's obsession with Ukraine in particular does not extend to NATO allies such as Poland or the Baltic states.²¹ Second, the assertion that Russia might attack member states to break NATO apart assumes that Moscow is confident NATO would not respond forcefully to a conventional attack on a member and that this failure would, in turn, show the hollowness of members' commitments to collective defense.²² However, those making this argument provide no evidence that Russian decisionmakers are confident NATO would fail to respond. Even if a *fait accompli* in the Baltics succeeded, it is far from clear that allies would drop their commitment to defend the rest of allied territory—or that Moscow sees such a development as likely. Even if unity on collective defense faltered, major NATO member states could still carry out operations as a coalition of the willing. Therefore, the benefit Russia could expect from an attack demonstrating the limits of NATO's will to fight for every inch of territory would be uncertain, while the consequences of a resulting war with NATO would be extremely high.

Some analysts argue that Russia's intentions—particularly future intentions—are inherently unknowable, so the United States needs to adopt a posture that

Optimizing strategy around unlikely opportunistic aggression presents two problems

focuses on Moscow's capabilities.²³ Such an approach is appealing—after all, it feels prudent to be prepared for any threat that a powerful adversary *could* pose. But optimizing strategy and posture around unlikely opportunistic aggression scenarios presents two problems. First, the United States has limited resources, so the choice to maintain a larger ground force structure in Europe limits the resources available to invest in forces needed

for other domestic and international priorities—including contingencies in the Indo-Pacific—over the medium to long term. Second, the policies adopted to deter an opportunistic Russian attack on NATO may create tradeoffs, particularly by making other pathways to conflict more likely, as we detail below.

None of this is to argue that opportunistic Russian aggression is impossible or that we can perfectly predict Russian intentions. After all, Putin has surprised the United States and its allies many times in the past, including with the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. But there is a difference between considering such opportunistic aggression to be a remote, but not impossible, contingency, and making it the central planning assumption for US strategy in Europe.

Assumption 4: If Putin “Wins” in Ukraine, the Security of the Alliance Will Be in Peril

In addition to assertions about the postwar Russia threat to NATO, Western leaders have also asserted that the outcome of the war itself will have direct consequences for NATO's security. French President Emmanuel Macron has stated that “If Russia were to win, the lives of the French would change. We will no longer have security in Europe.”²⁴ A former US ambassador to Ukraine claimed that “if the United States did not stick with Ukraine, which has cost the lives of no U.S. soldiers, would Putin believe that it would send its military to fight to defend eastern Estonia?”²⁵ In other words, insufficient Western support could embolden Russia to attack a NATO member. Former US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland went further, arguing that US global credibility is on the line: “If Putin wins here, then dictators and tyrants all over the world will take note and will get hungry with their own territorial aspirations.”²⁶

Those making such strong claims have not been explicit about what kind of outcomes would constitute a Russian victory. An absolute victory—defined in the international relations literature as “permanently removing the (interstate) threat posed by [the] adversary”—appears impossible for Russia to achieve (unless it resorts to the use of nuclear weapons).²⁷ While it is true that that the war might end with Russia occupying more Ukrainian land than it had before February 2022, framing such an outcome as a victory that would embolden the Kremlin (or others) to do something similar in the future is a stretch. Russia has paid a high price for its aggression in Ukraine; Russian casualties are estimated to top 350,000.²⁸ The war has also triggered NATO enlargement, greater NATO defense spending, and a large coalition of countries imposing punishing sanctions. Russia's economic future is bleak, many of its best and brightest have fled, and its status as an international pariah will persist for years. Therefore, it is highly implausible that Moscow would draw the lesson that future conquest, particularly against a NATO member, would be cheap and easy.

This Rhetoric Matters ...

The dire warnings about postwar Russia's intentions and capabilities have, by summer 2024, become commonplace—almost *de rigueur*—in Western leaders'

Statements to rally support constrain leaders' choices about the postwar order

public statements on the subject. But before these rhetorical assertions become analytical conventional wisdom, their empirical underpinnings must be closely examined. Political scientist Bruce Cronin's research has demonstrated that leaders' statements made to rally public support and maintain international coalitions during a conflict have had the unintended consequence of constraining those same leaders' choices about postwar order. He concludes that "the necessity of building support for the war effort can in fact create a political reality that changes the calculation of interests for the winning states."²⁹

The periods following major wars are precisely the moments when states should seek to keep their options open; the policy choices that the United States and other powerful countries make—or do not make—in a war's aftermath tend to have long-term effects. Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry refer to these windows for important decision-making after great power wars as *ordering moments*: "at these rare junctures, the great powers are forced to grapple with and come to agreement on the general principles and arrangements of international order."³⁰ The paradigmatic ordering moment came after World War II, when the United States and its allies created NATO, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and other organizations that continue to define global order 75 years later.³¹ The Russia-Ukraine war is not a global systemic conflict as of this writing; its end therefore might not present a global ordering moment. However, the choices around even regional wars have resulted in arrangements that define regional security and create durable patterns of relations. For example, the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement and the US-South Korea bilateral security treaty (also signed in 1953) established a security architecture on the peninsula that has largely endured through the present.

US and allied policymakers' decisions after the hot phase of the Russia-Ukraine war comes to an end will likely have significant long-term effects on Western interests. But today's rhetoric about the Russia threat could constrain options at what will be a critical time. In order to be in a position to make deliberate choices which reflect long-term interests at that future inflection point, leaders need to adjust their rhetoric to accurately reflect the nature of the Russia threat.

More Likely Pathways to NATO-Russia Conflict

The security environment in postwar Europe is going to be extremely tense. Russia will remain isolated from the rest of the continent, since few if any

of the prewar economic, humanitarian, transit, and political links with the West will be restored. It will be a militarized society, with thousands of hardened combat veterans, new ideological indoctrination in schools and universities, and a declared foreign policy of open antagonism to the West. Most of its officer corps and political leaders will likely consider the West partially if not fully responsible for the deaths of untold numbers of Russian soldiers. Meanwhile, NATO's enlargement in 2023-24 more than doubles the alliance's direct frontiers with Russia, taking the total to 1,584 miles. The alliance will have far more forces forward-deployed than before the war, and European allies are increasing defense spending and building up their militaries.

Two More-Plausible Pathways

High levels of political and military tension are particularly dangerous in situations when there are strong pressures to strike first in the event of conflict, as is the case with Russia today. Russian strategic writings hold that the United States would use long-range strike systems early to attack Russian leadership, command and control, nuclear, and other military targets. Since it has few defenses against such systems, Moscow would be under pressure to strike first to degrade allied capabilities before its ability to retaliate would be compromised.³² US plans for deployment of intermediate range missiles to Germany could further exacerbate concerns about the vulnerability of key Russian leadership and military targets.³³ As a result, Russia would face even greater pressure to strike first to limit the damage such systems could impose. In the context of high political tensions, there is a risk that Russia could come to believe that conflict is inevitable, leading it to act on these first-strike incentives.³⁴

For example, in such a context, Russia could misinterpret the deployment of allies' forces in the Baltic region for exercises as a prelude to intervention in Belarus. Alternatively, NATO allies could interpret a large-scale, no-notice Russian "snap" exercise in Belarus as a ruse to move forces in place to attack Lithuania or Latvia. Even if the United States does not share that interpretation, some eastern flank allies might act independently; officials in several of those states have suggested they would opt for early escalation so as to prevent Moscow from exploiting any ambiguity and ensure US involvement regardless of Washington's preferences.³⁵ Their reactions, in turn, could lead Russia to see war as inevitable and act on its first-strike incentives. While the absolute chance of Russia launching such an anticipatory attack is low given the costs and risks, it is more plausible than the opportunistic aggression scenarios that appear to be animating policymakers today.

Conflict recurrence in Ukraine would increase the risk of Russia-NATO war

In addition to misinterpretation or miscalculation, conflict recurrence in Ukraine would also increase the risk of a Russia-NATO war. As has been the case during the current conflict, a new hot war between Russia and Ukraine would open pathways to a Russia-NATO war that do not exist in peacetime. For example, despite the strength of NATO's deterrent, Russia could launch limited strikes in NATO member states to disrupt supply lines to Ukraine out of desperation if its forces were on the brink of defeat. Any signs that a NATO member state was preparing to enter the war—or steps misinterpreted as such a sign—could prompt Moscow to strike that

country preemptively.³⁶ Further, Russian aggression could provoke some NATO members to decide to enter the war to defend Ukraine.

To be clear, both pathways described here—misperception and first-strike pressures in a tense security environment leading to a clash, and the escalation of a second Russia-Ukraine war to a NATO-Russia war—lead to the same outcome as the scenarios of opportunistic Russian aggression: a conflict between the world's largest nuclear power and the world's most powerful military alliance. But the mechanism and drivers of conflict could not be more different. In the opportunistic aggression scenarios, Moscow attacks because it sees significant benefits to doing so; it has been emboldened by “victory” in Ukraine; it has capability advantages over NATO; and believes that there would be no significant consequences. As we have demonstrated above, these four assumptions are problematic. In the two more likely pathways we put forward, war results not from a sense of opportunity, but from a perceived threat, be it that of a NATO first strike or a defeat in Ukraine. Neither of these pathways are likely in absolute terms, but the evidence suggests they are more likely than the opportunistic aggression scenario that appears to have become the new conventional wisdom.

Today's Focus Exacerbates Likely Pathways

Policies based on the emerging conventional wisdom are not only aimed at countering a remote contingency, but they would also exacerbate these two more likely pathways to NATO-Russia conflict. Policymakers' worst-case assumptions about Moscow's intentions, the effectiveness of NATO's deterrent, and the speed of Russian military reconstitution lead to clear prescriptions: the United States should increase its force posture across the continent above current levels; allies should deploy more personnel, materiel and infrastructure in the east;

NATO should show resolve through dramatically increased military activities in vulnerable member states; and allies should feel no need to engage in postwar arms control or any other talks with an inalterably aggressive Moscow. In fact, a CSIS-led study has already called for increasing US presence in Europe above current levels (including air, naval, and ground forces as well as air and missile defense capabilities and prepositioned stockpiles) based on the assumptions described above.³⁷ Adopting these policies would do little to enhance NATO's already strong deterrent. But doing so would exacerbate Russia's first-strike pressures and increase the chance that Moscow might come to see conflict as inevitable.

Equally, assumptions that dire consequences will ensue from any outcome in Ukraine which can be construed as a Russian victory also lead to clear policy prescriptions. For example, some analysts have argued that hesitation to extend Kyiv a membership offer after the war would embolden Russia and fatally damage the alliance's credibility. Others have claimed that any limitations on the kinds of military assistance provided to Kyiv would represent a dangerous concession to Russia that could embolden the Kremlin to attack again.³⁸ However, past cases of US restraint have not emboldened Russia to undertake acts of aggression.³⁹ But if the alliance were to push for rapid Ukrainian NATO membership, Russia would have increased incentives to launch a war to prevent such an outcome. Providing unlimited military aid to Ukraine after the war ends could similarly make it more likely that Moscow would attack to prevent an adverse shift in the balance of power.

Wanted: A Strategy to Minimize the Risk of NATO-Russia War

Grounded in an understanding of the more plausible pathways to conflict, NATO should adopt a comprehensive strategy aimed at minimizing the chances of a direct clash while maintaining effective deterrence, countering Russian threats below that threshold, and ultimately stabilizing the security environment on the continent. Once the fighting in Ukraine has ceased, the United States and its allies should send the message that they will exercise restraint if Russia adjusts its behavior.

If planning for the postwar period is recentered around the challenge of avoiding a Russia-NATO war caused by misperception in a tense security environment or by escalation of a second full-scale Russia-Ukraine war, different policy prescriptions would result. Allies could take steps to reduce

If planning for the postwar is recentered around these pathways, different policy prescriptions result

political and military tensions and, thereby, the risk of conflict due to misperception.⁴⁰ These could include reducing the US military presence in Europe from its wartime high of 100,000 personnel or pulling some of the forces deployed forward since 2022 back to Western Europe. After all, the alliance made these posture enhancements to deter attacks on NATO members in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine.⁴¹ Once the hot phase of the war is over and the associated risks to member states is lower, redeploying forces would send a signal that the alliances' aims are defensive and reduce the risk that Russia would see conflict as inevitable. Given Russia's recent track record of aggression, any reductions should be gradual. But if the hot war in Ukraine does in fact end, the force posture enhancements made in response to Russia's actions should be adjusted. Otherwise, allies risk sending the message that they perceive no security benefit from an end to Russia's assault on Ukraine.

Ideally, any such reductions or adjustments would be made through negotiated measures to ensure mutual restraint. The existing conventional arms control regime in Europe is moribund and not fit for the purposes of stabilizing this newly antagonistic relationship between an enlarged NATO and an isolated Russia. However, Moscow might be open to new arrangements that would potentially limit the numbers of forces permanently deployed in close proximity; reduce concerns about a first strike; create communications mechanisms; and limit the ability to conduct a surprise attack. Moreover, the United States could signal a willingness to discuss limits on ballistic missile defense capabilities and intermediate range ground-based missiles or unilaterally limit US deployments. Even if Russia seems unwilling to engage, allies should consider at least putting forth proposals to indicate their interest in stability.

Since a second full-scale Russia-Ukraine war would also open a pathway to conflict with NATO, Washington and other allied capitals can take steps in the postwar period to reduce the risk of conflict recurrence in Ukraine. If the issue of Ukraine's geopolitical alignment is not addressed in the negotiations to end the fighting, then refraining from rapid moves toward Kyiv's NATO membership in the postwar period would reduce the risk of a second war. It is not impossible that Russia would eventually accept Ukraine's NATO membership, but sudden progress toward membership without Russia's acquiescence would incentivize Moscow to renew its aggression in order to preclude that outcome.⁴²

Additionally, allies' military assistance to Ukraine should support a porcupine strategy, one optimized for defending the territory Kyiv holds at the end of the war. This would mean that allies would not provide training and assistance, as they have during the war, focused on improving Ukraine's capacity to retake territory. Although offensive and defensive capabilities overlap to some degree, there are important differences. For example, to support a porcupine strategy, the United States would help Ukraine develop mine laying capabilities rather

than those needed to breach Russian minefields. A porcupine strategy should be more effective at deterring a future Russian attack since, given the same level of resources, Ukraine would make it harder for Moscow to take more territory if it adopted a posture optimized for defense as opposed to one that devotes more resources to combined-arms offense.

Weighing the Tradeoffs

Western policy choices on European security after the Russia-Ukraine war will be challenging—and no outcome is likely to be fully satisfying. NATO will be facing a dangerous rival with lofty ambitions, little stake in regional security, and a chip on its shoulder. But allies do have options. The option that currently appears most likely to result from the new conventional wisdom on the Russia threat will produce a highly volatile security environment, characterized by a higher risk of conflict recurrence in Ukraine and a direct NATO-Russia clash due to misperception or first-strike concerns. Our proposed approach, by contrast, suggests a path to a more stable competition with Russia. NATO-Russia relations will likely be much more fraught than before the war, but still less likely to produce a catastrophic conflict. Such a strategy does not expect to produce a transformed Russia that lives in harmony with the West, but rather a more stable relationship despite continued rivalry.⁴³

Of course, Russia could turn out to be more capable, harder to deter, and more willing to engage in opportunistic aggression than our analysis suggests. If Moscow did attack an ally, under our approach NATO could be in a less advantageous position to respond. This is certainly a risk that decisionmakers should take seriously. But all options entail some risk. Even proponents of an enhanced posture in Europe acknowledge that Russia would still have the ability to seize some NATO territory if their recommendations were implemented.⁴⁴ NATO will always be reliant to some degree on the threat of punishment for deterrence, a threat which would still remain credible even with fewer forces forward-deployed. Some may worry that any adjustments in NATO's posture toward Russia after the war would embolden the Kremlin. But there is no evidence that past efforts to stabilize relations between Russia and the West have undermined deterrence.⁴⁵

While avoiding a conventional conflict with Russia and related questions of NATO's force posture are certainly important issues, arguably this focus obscures the real short-term threat from the Kremlin: the persistent campaign of sabotage, cyberattacks, active measures, and other highly assertive actions in Europe (and beyond) that have become more commonplace. Enhanced conventional force posture on the continent can do little to address these

challenges. Instead, enhanced cooperation among law enforcement, intelligence, cyber incident response centers, as well as a more comprehensive approach to resilience, will be required. In the meantime, US and NATO postwar strategy, while accounting for remote contingencies, should focus on cutting off the more likely pathways to war with Russia. And allied leaders should be careful to avoid rhetoric that locks them into policies which could raise the risk of such a war.

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